



ISSN: 2321-8819 (Online) 2348-7186 (Print) Impact Factor: 1.498 Vol. 6, Issue 6, June, 2018

Self-Other Relations in the English Language Writing of Nigerian School Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which Nigerian secondary school students portray their selves and other relations through the context of writing. Using a social cognitive theory by Bandura (1989) as the underpinning theoretical framework, we examine how the selves are reflected in the written texts. We collect data from the writings of the selected students. The study draws attention to three themes: appreciation as an indicator of relating self to the other, salutation as an initiator to relate to the other, and caring as a way of appreciating the other. The study contributes in enriching self development in writing and awareness of how self attempts to relate to the other through various ways in writing. We recommend that future research seeks to examine fully how self and other relations are embedded in the ESL writing of other genres among Nigerian undergraduate or postgraduate students.

Keywords: self and other relations, second language writing, secondary school, students, Nigeria.

Introduction

Language occupies a significant place in the construction of self and other relations in written and spoken discourse. This entails that people tend to communicate with each other whilst at the same time attempting to make sense of self and other in the discourse (Harun, 2007) as self-other social interaction is a joint effort (Blumer, 1937). Similarly, language is central in displaying self and other relations in a text (Morgan, 1994). This paper offers contribution to the ways 'self and other' relates to each other through their written communication as displayed by male and female teenagers in a Nigerian public secondary school in Adamawa state in northern Nigeria. Writing in English language is highly challenging particularly for most non- native writers including Nigerians, who acquired English as a foreign and second language (Crystal, 2001; Nwogu, 2008; Huy, 2015) that writing is a skill that can help language user to improve his or her knowledge of using new words and grammar in the process of written communication. Secondly, writing is an important

instrument that can help language learner to improve on the other language skills. Thirdly, it is also a means of equipping new information technology. Finally, competency in writing specifically in English language is important for young graduates that are looking for employment.

However, researches on self and other relations in students' writings tend to be limited, and are often neglected specifically among Nigerian secondary school students. Thus, we argue that exploring how self and other relations are displayed in the students' writings as second language learners of English is much needed given that the subject is under-researched. Studies have shown that over the years English language remained as a core subject in Nigerian schools in order to fulfill the academic needs of the country (Ezenwosu, 2011; Fakeye, 2014). It also helps in addressing career development aspects (Muodumogu & Unwaha, 2013) and for the purpose of communication between diverse ethnic groups (Danladi, 2013) in a multilingual and multiethnic group like Nigeria with not less than 500 tribal groups (Okoro, 2012). Drawing input from larger academic works, this study discusses the self and other relations within the framework of socio-cognitive theory by Bandura (1989).

Self and Other Relations in Writing

Several studies have been conducted on academic discourse focusing on the construction of self and other in narrative fiction, writing task and foreign language (Coplan, 2004; Eoffi, 1952; Jacops, 1975; Kraft, 2007; Major, 2004; Morf & Harvath, 2007). For instance, Alpaslan (2016) examines the existing relationship among Turkish elementary school pupils with special reference to learning strategies and performance in science subjects. The study selected three hundred and twenty two fifth-grade pupils as participants. The results demonstrated from the structural equation modeling that the pupils' personal epistemologies affect both their interest and meta-cognitive strategies in science subjects. Mean while,





Schwinger and associates (2014) explored how self-handicapping represents a frequently employed strategy for regulating the threat to self-esteem elicited by the fear of failing in academic performance context. The study used eighty five participants for the in-depth interviews. The findings showed that educational assistances to promote academic performance should gear towards focusing on preventing self-handicapping. Warker (2009) investigates relations among student perceptions of school achievement goals, self-efficacy, perceived instrumentality of classroom work and sense of belonging within the school environment. Two hundred and forty nine high school students were considered as participants for the study. The study demonstrated that the used of mastery goals was assumed by perceived instrumentality and self efficacy, whereas cognitive involvement was also predicted by engaging in perceived instrumentality. Similarly, the study revealed that classroom activity promotes a mastery orientation in relation to student's sense of belonging. Simacheva and associates (2017) examined the trust and distrust phenomenon of students who have different abilities of creativity and varying degrees of experiences of participation in innovative activity. The study selected only undergraduate students as participants. The result revealed that development of trust in others particularly to young generation with high levels of creativity helps in promoting group work. Wong (2008) investigated the effects of perceived parental interference and autonomy contribution on student performance and substance employed among adolescents. The study used one hundred and seventy one participants for its data. The study found that the higher the parents continue to involved themselves in their children's academic affairs the more the students work hard for better academic performance. Bong (2001) used confirmatory factor analysis to explore between-domain relations of self-efficacy, task-value, and achievement goal orientations. The study used four hundred and twenty four Korean middle and high school students as participants. The findings indicate that consistent patterns of relations were detected in four separates' academic areas within each age circle. Polman (2012) investigated the difference between how choices people make for themselves varies from what people choices for others. The study used six different studies together with a field study in collecting the data for the research. The result indicated that people who make choices for themselves are less convinced

after selecting among many available alternatives than those who make choices for others. Wilson and associates (2013) discussed the effects of female only classes in a rural context. Two middle schools in rural east Texas were used for data collection. The study demonstrated that a rural population, patterns of texts varies between-only and coeducational schools. However, female students in single-sex classes had significantly poor levels of general self-concept than female students in coeducational classes. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the performance test scores between the two groups. Meanwhile, Schalk (2011) discussed the effects of the mass media on contemporary awareness, identity and self-other relations. It suggested an approach to the self and other binary which provides an opportunities for relations between persons by involving a third party, the other-self which can permits relatedness to others in any given time.

In Nigerian context, little studies have been found on self and other relations in area of academic discourse. Adou (2016) explores the importance of the concept happy feminism by confronting it to the present research on Nigerian gender discourse. The study highlighted that the truth about the term of happy feminism is problematically under theorized.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a public secondary school in Adamawa state, Nigeria. The narrative texts were written in English language because the writers were taught in English language as a medium of instruction in all the levels of Nigerian schools. The writing test was administered to form five students who are between sixteen and eighteen years old. Specifically, the data were collected in the months of August and September, 2017. Forty five minutes was given to the students for the writing test activity. A total of fifteen students participated in the writing test which was done in class with the presence of the class teacher. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants with the help of their English teachers. They must be form five for the level of maturity and know how to write in English. They were asked to write on the topic titled "My experience as a junior secondary school student".

The following table (Table 1) presents the participants' profile. Pseudonyms were used to protect the respondents' anonymity (Creswell, 2014; Gray, 2004).

**Table1: Participants' Profile**

SN	Participants	Gender	Age	Tribe	Religion
1	S 1	Female	16	Hausa	Islam
2	S 2	Male	18	Fulani	Islam
3	S 3	Female	17	Bachama	Christian
4	S 4	Male	18	Vere	Islam
5	S 5	Male	17	Vere	Christian
6	S 6	Female	16	Yoruba	Islam
7	S 7	Male	16	Fulani	Islam
8	S 8	Female	17	Igbo	Christian
9	S 9	Male	17	Hausa	Islam
10	S 10	Female	18	Igbo	Christian
11	S 11	Female	17	Lunguda	Christian
12	S 12	Male	17	Igbo	Christian
13	S 13	Male	16	Bata	Christian
14	S 14	Male	17	Yoruba	Islam
15	S 15	Male	18	Vere	Islam

Key:

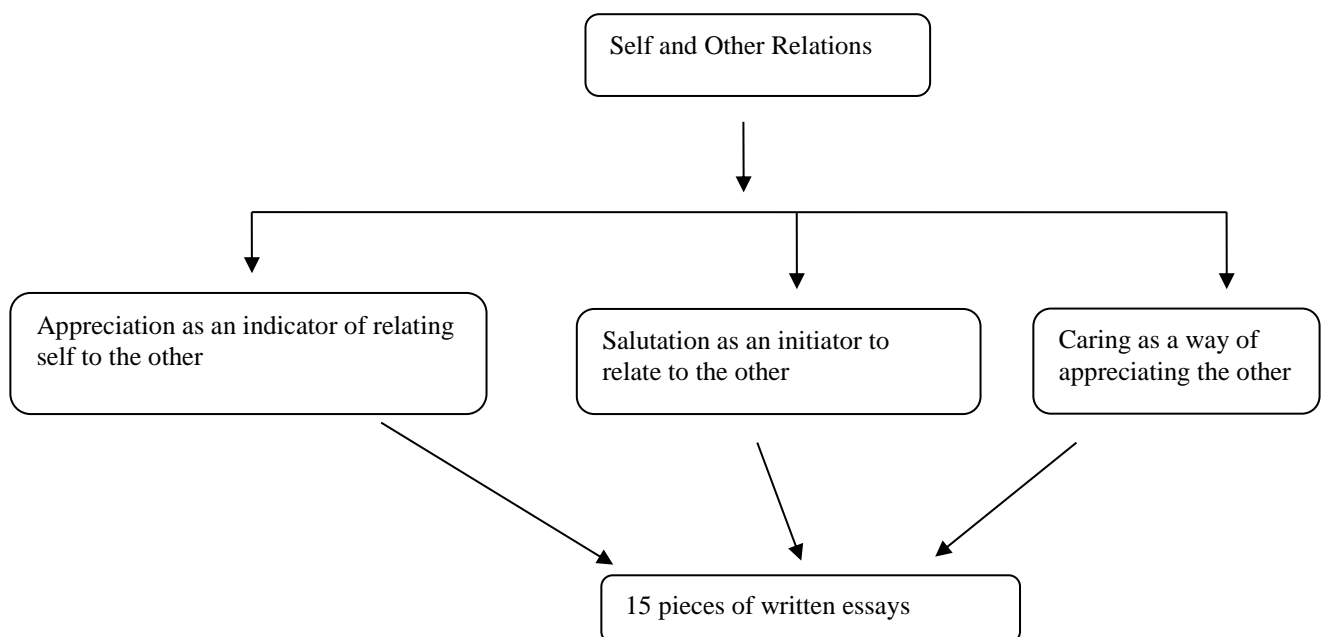
S= Students

Source: Students' registration files as shared by the school.

The writing test is part of the English language syllabus. The students were asked to write based on their experiences in not more than three hundred and fifty words. The written task was administered in a public College, Yola a school situated in the state capital precisely from the central zone of Adamawa state, Nigeria. The written essays were analyzed, coded and categorized (Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 2014).

Findings

Based on the rigorous analysis, three dominant themes emerged from the written essays as shown in the following diagram.

Figure 1: Themes of self (student-as-author) and other (reader/audience)**Theme 1: Appreciation as an indicator of relating self to the other:**



Most of the student-writers are found to be using vocabularies, phrases or sentences which are affiliated to ones religion or cultural background as particular style of presenting selves. Here are some examples of how the writers (selves) conveyed their appreciation toward the other as shown in the following narratives:

... *Alhamdulillah* with the *support of my father* who refused and resists the pressure from the family I proceeded to go to school... (S 8)

... As a new student my *senior brother* continue to guide, advice and assist me which helps me a lot, *I am very grateful to him*... (S 10)

... *I thank God* with the *concern of my fellow friends* in the school who always identify with me during trying moment... (S 5)

... I have nothing to say apart from *thanking God for being with me up to this level*... (S 4)

... *My class mistress* is always *happy with me* because of my performance in the class... (S 6)

Note: S= refers to student (student participant)

The excerpts from the students' writings demonstrate how each of the writers as 'selves' used language to convey their appreciations to their readers (others) in writing. For instance, one student (S8) uses borrowed word '*alhamdulillah*...' to remark her appreciation to the creator and her father (other) for supporting her in the course of pursuing education. While in the second narration, (S10) shows his appreciation to the other through the use of the phrase '*I am very grateful*...' referring to his brother (other) who continues offering advice, guide and assistance to him during the needed period. Similarly, an act of appreciation is also displayed by (S5) through the use of the statement '*identify with me during trying moment*...' This statement indicates that the writer displays some form of appreciation to his friend (other). Also, the findings reveal how (S4) uses the phrase '*thank God*' which suggests an act of showing appreciation as a relation to the reader (other) through the written platform. Finally, a relation of appreciation is also exhibited by (S6) through the use of a word '*happy*' to his female class teacher, who is referred to as "*mistress*" (the other) in that particular written text.

Theme 2: Salutation as an initiator to relate to other

The second theme emerges when the writers are found to be using borrowed words and English phrases as particular styles of acknowledging and relating to others in their writings:

... Let me start by *acknowledging your attentions and presents* before proceeding to discuss the main subject... (S 7)

... *Assalamu alaikum* my brothers and sisters... (S 3)

... As junior students, we must *greet* our teachers and senior students as a sign of respect... (S 11)

First and foremost, I want to *extend my greetings* to you and I am... (S 13)

... The new teacher that was sends to our class... after *we welcome him*... he introduced himself and the subject... (S 12)

We must *claps* for our legislators for the work Weldon on revisiting the existing laws on drug abuse seeing how it affects the youths... (S 15)

The writings demonstrate how the participants display a relationship that suggests salutation from the selves (authors) to the others (readers) in different styles through the content of their written texts. The style used by the student-writers include the use of borrowed words, English phrases, and words which helps the participants to show that salutation is also a factor connecting the self and the other in written communication. More specifically, through written communication such as the students' samples essay, the findings reveal the participants' ways of relating to the others as illustrated by (S7, S 3, S11, S13, S12, and S15). For instance, S (7) uses a phrase '*...acknowledging your attentions and presence*...' which suggests that the writer (self) is conveying greetings or salutation to his audience (others) through such a phrase in the written extract. Also, a borrowed words from Arabic language as in "*Assalamu alaikum*" is used by S (3) to communicate his salutation to the others, identified as the writer's brother and sister in that text. Similarly, from the text written by (S11) the use of the word "*greet*" demonstrates how the relation that reflects salutation between the self and the others which comprise (teachers and senior students) embedded in the writing. The findings reveal the use of the phrase "*My greetings*" S (13) in an effort to convey salutation as an intended messages to the others who he described using the pronoun "*you*".



Meanwhile, S (12) uses the phrase “we welcome him” meaning that they greeted the new teacher as the other in the context of the text. The excerpt by S (15) communicates an act of salutation from the writer to the others who is identified as the legislators in the writing.

Theme 3: Caring as a way of appreciating the other

The theme reveals the participants’ way of showing that they care through their written communication. Among the words used includes: loves, likes, treats, advice, and guidance. The following are some illustrations from the students’ writings:

... He even sends a letter asking me to accept him as his girl friend that he *loves* me... (S 2)

... Also my form mistress *like* me because of my intelligent, she also appointed me as a monitor in the class... (S 13)

... I had also come in contact with many teachers; I *like* most of them... (S 9)

... Our class mistress always *treats us as her children* by giving advice... (S14)

The first excerpt above uses personal pronoun ‘he’ to refer back to the other in the text. Likewise, the self is presented as the object in the extract. The writer employs the verb “loves” to demonstrate the kind of relation that exist between the two interlocutors (self and other) which portray elements of caring and affection (S2). Mean while, S(13) is able to use another form of verb, that is “like” to communicate the type of relation between the form mistress (teacher as the other) and the former (student) which leads to the caring and concern factors due to the performance of the student during the class activities. Similarly, writers (9) reflects their relation with the others through the use of static “like” to show the care and concern for his teachers as presented in the text. Finally, the last excerpt indicates how the writer (14) use the verb “treats” to remember the caring attitude by the other in the written texts.

Discussion

The paper highlights three themes from the student written communication. The themes are: appreciation as an indicator of relating self to other, salutation as an initiator to relate to the other, and caring as a way of appreciating the other.

Theme one, “appreciation as an indicator of relating self to the other”, discusses how the students’ writers used words and phrases through the means of writing to presents the existing

relation of appreciation between them and the other (reader) in a written communication. Such words and phrases tend acknowledge appreciation of the other. These include: *I am grateful to him...*, *...support of my father...*, *... for being with me up to this level...*, *... concern of my fellow friends...*, *...happy with me...*. In this regards, the finding of this study aligns with other studies which highlight the use of words to express the relations of self and other in writing (Hyllad, 2002b; Morrish, 2002; Muhammad, Nair & Sarjit, 2016).

Theme two, “salutation as an initiator to relate to the other”, reveals how the use of noun, adjectival and verbal phrases by the writers helps to reflect self and other relations in their written texts. More specifically, the paper reinforces that the students used these phrases ‘*... my greetings...*, *...assalamu alikum...*, *...we welcome him...*’ which all suggest that the writer (self) is conveying salutation to the others (readers). This result coincides with the findings of the works of other studies that examined written texts by post graduate students and found that they used borrowed words from Arabic language convey salutation to others by the self (Muhammad, Nair & Sarjit, 2016; Adou, 2016).

Theme three, “caring as a way of appreciating the other” indicates how the students-writers show the caring attitude as an existing relation between them and the other in writings. The study observed that the most dominant part of speech used to communicate this intension is the use of verbs. The examples of such verbs used are: *loves*, *like*, *treats* as evident in the written texts. In line with the study aim, the finding reveals that the participants’ demonstrate caring as a form of endearment toward the other as stated in the texts in the academic context (Andreouli, 2010; Martin & Nakayama, 2013). The result of this paper seems cohere with the opinions of several scholars on self and other relations in the writing within the school environment which include relations such as relation of appreciations, salutation, and caring (Adou, 2016; Alpaslan, 2016; Simacheva et al, 2017; Warker, 2009; Wong, 2008). Similarly, any aspects related to self and other relations can help to enhance the individual’s writing given that the task is always intended for particular target readers. The interpersonal relations will tend to mould the individual’s text and mind which directs him or her to construct the writing within the expectations of the reader, as is the case of the Nigerian secondary school respondents. They know who their immediate reader is in the academic realm and those that they think might also read their pieces of writing in future.



Conclusion

The study has explored how second language learners in Nigerian context specifically secondary school students construct self and other relations through their English language writing. The student narratives demonstrate their skills of using the medium of English as a second language in displaying self and other interpersonal relations in an academic discourse. The knowledge of word choice and sentence structure assists them in projecting their ideas of relating to the other through written communication. The excerpts discussed in the paper also witness the errors

committed by the students in terms of grammar, spelling, word choice, and sentence structure. More attention should be provided on how to improve teaching and learning writing skills among ESL learners in Nigerian context by all the relevant stakeholders in education. More studies should also be done on how self and other relations are constructed in the other writing types, for instance, project paper and dissertations among the students at the higher institutions. In this regard, the research can provide the educators on how to improve the students' skills of writing bearing in mind the expectations of the other (teacher) in an academic environment.

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